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The Web for French grammar: a tool, a resource or a waste of time?

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The paper reviews selected Web sites for French grammar, from the student's point of view. The investigation looks at the content of sites and their potential for learning. The conclusion is that the Web for French is both underused and chaotic but there is evidence that, with imagination, it could become a useful resource.

Learners, Grammar, and the Web

This paper stems from the two following questions: If I were a language student trying to learn grammar in my L2, and I wanted to use the Web exclusively to do so, what would I be liable to find there? What more would I be entitled to expect from a Web-based approach to French grammar than is already available in traditional form?

Before answering these questions, I need to say a little about 'exclusively', 'Web' and 'grammar'. By 'exclusively', I mean that I have ruled out formal Web-based courses of study, as these are fee-paying and restricted-access. Instead, I have in mind a constituency of learners using public-access presentational Web-sites and Web courses, as well as other Internet tools, such as Usenet newsgroups and MOOs. Such learners are any age, and they

can also be teachers looking for resources for their learners, or using the Web as L2 improvers for themselves. They may want to find particular grammar-related topics, grammar clinics, exercises, tool kits, on-line magazines or journals specialising in grammar, or they may just want to browse. Finally, the word 'grammar' is being used here as a convenient form of shorthand for 'grammatical competence and accuracy in the use of the L2', including in its spoken form.

French is the L2 chosen for the purposes of this review. Those teaching French on the Web generally use French as the medium for teaching. Mostly, Web addresses (Uniform Resource Locators or URLs) relevant to this study are from North America, the highest number being Canadian, with English-French bilingual sites.

There are hundreds of sites dealing with

French grammar. They are signposted and reviewed in dozens of gateway sites. Site names and reviews can be mouth-watering: “*Les meilleurs exercices proposés sur le Web jusqu’à ce jour!*” (‘The best exercises available on the Web to date’, a daring promise) or “*Ce site est tout désigné pour les étudiants dont la langue maternelle est l’anglais*” (‘This site is ideal for students with English mother tongue’, a claim about a dense, black and white Web page listing French nouns, but empty of any guidance on how to learn them, let alone any links, and hardly ‘ideal’ for any student, ‘with English mother tongue’ or not). In reality, promises are frequently not kept, and many of these sites are disappointing in the quantity and quality of their contents; or else they are vestiges of vanished sites. Because it is not possible to guarantee systematic coverage of all Web sites concerned, this study is of necessity selective, and its findings couched in terms of general tendencies.

A Double Set of Criteria for Evaluation

A good educational Web site satisfies two sets of criteria: a winning formula would be one which combined excellent use of the medium with excellent content. In fact, we find different configurations: enthusiastic use of the medium but poor pedagogical quality, sound pedagogy making little use of the potential of the medium, and variations along the way.

When examining sites, I have borne in mind the methodological requirements of good grammar teaching, and related them to the aims of the site-designers, wherever they are declared. For instance, is the site a self-standing course, a taster for a fee-paying course, a placement test, a teaching resource or a bit of fun? If the product is presented as a ‘course’, does it have pacing built in, in a carefully balanced mix of form-focused inputs such as graded practise exercises involving examples of language in use and self-scoring or correction by teacher, followed by consolidation and transfer activities? Is the syllabus introduced? Are the level of input and of the

target audience clearly defined and explicitly declared? Is the development of grammar study skills addressed? Is the corpus of examples taken from the written or spoken language? How are socio-linguistic and register features dealt with? Is the approach descriptive or prescriptive? Is use made of text-grammar methodology, i.e. is the functioning of grammatical features described from the starting point of their use in authentic written or spoken texts, at levels higher than the sentence? How are error correction and testing approached: by giving ‘the right answer’? extra feedback? a score? Is the metalanguage explained on a need-to-know basis, or perhaps defined in a glossary? Are issues of language awareness addressed? In the next two sections, I look at the content of ‘grammar’ sites, then at the use made of the medium by site designers.

Content of French ‘Grammar’ Sites

Coherence of Approach to Grammar

As Eastment (1996) noted in his report on the Internet and ELT, Web publishing is entirely different from conventional publishing, in respect of quality control. “The logo of a well-known publisher is a guarantee that, even if the work is not relevant to a user’s needs, it will not be a waste of time” (*ibid*: 51). On the Web, in contrast, it is very easy for individuals or organisations to put up text that has not been through a rigorous process of critical reading, refereeing, editing or proof checking.

Thus Web grammar courses are frequently not paced, but consist of exercises ‘bolted on’ to each other without explanation. For example, French Lessons with Real Audio Sound by International Language Development (ILD)¹ has very little by way of an introduction or a rationale for the division of the site into pages entitled ‘lesson’, ‘vocabulary’, ‘grammar’ and ‘exercises’. (What, one wonders, is the difference between ‘grammar’, a ‘lesson’ and ‘exercises’?) Lack of clarity and non-existent proof-reading combine with nonsensical exemplification in this extract about pronouns, cut and pasted from ‘a CALL site for teaching German, Russian, Italian, English

and French' (GRIEF) which claims to provide "help with grammar and translation"².

"As well as the subject pronouns in the table, there is also on which means one. Therefore, 'on' can be used to mean we or they. Ce as in this, that is also a subject pronoun which is used with the common verb être. You will recognise its use in the plural form c'est. 'Ce' is not a polite form."

I am tempted to add a few exclamation marks in virtual red ink. Another example of poor presentation is the ILD site's index which unhelpfully subdivides the site into 'Grammar 1', 'Grammar 2', 'Grammar 3', etc.

Choice of grammar topics is another area of inconsistency. Sites either read like the table of contents of traditional grammar books, as in academic French sites like Erindale College, University of Toronto³ and the Téléquébec site for teachers, Allô Prof⁴, or they display an arbitrary selection of topics (e.g. GRIEF's choice of nouns, pronouns and verbs), sometimes aggravated by the accidental inaccessibility of some of the links (for instance GRIEF's link to verbs produced a 'Not Found' message).

There are quality sites, but even those suffer from inconsistency. A good example of this is the French Language Course by Jacques Léon⁵. This starts with a personalized introduction, a level 'definition' (basic French), a statement of aims and some sort of syllabus, a statement of non-commercial interest and an email address. A second introduction, one level down, explains the metalanguage used. The image is that of a charismatic maverick "I am not a grammarian, nor a teacher in French literature. However, I know my own language well enough to be able to teach it." But the voice of the author suddenly ceases to provide the cohesive overview, when the user is presented with an 'index' covering a mixture of structural elements (sentence structure), lexical lists (the family), notions (time) and transactions (where do you come from) without explanation or recommendations for pathways through this heterogeneous material.

Quality of content is most often found in university sites, which are aimed at more

advanced learners. They typically offer rationales for syllabuses, principles for the description of the target language and excursions into the history of the language. But the material is very often purely presentational, maybe in the form of a text-heavy 'lecture', with bibliography, as in the traditional print media, with insufficient or no advantage taken of Web technology. Appalachian State University provides one example of this⁶, the University of Toronto another.

Notions of language awareness are almost absent from grammar teaching on the Web, even though hypertext provides opportunities for introducing this. For instance, the Centre International d'Etudes Pédagogiques (CIEP)⁷ is a teachers' resource site where the French material is also offered in translation (English and other European languages), via hot links. *France à la Carte*⁸, the site of the Cultural Delegation of the French Embassy in London, also for teachers, uses alternative screens in French and English. However, neither site builds on this opportunity to be explicit about the different ways in which languages structure similar linguistic notions, or about the very different ways in which metalanguage is used in both teaching cultures.

Methodological approaches to grammar differ hugely from site to site. The discrepancies in quality can again be explained by the absence of quality assurance; anyone can publish his or her favourite ideas on what grammar is about. Some sites appear to be underpinned by no discernible method. Others are firmly rooted in a particular academic or national culture. Others are pragmatic and use methods intended to suit their target audience. Clicking on links in any French grammar gateway will call up documents embodying a variety of approaches, for instance transactional, like ILD or Travellers' French⁹, or structural as in Greg Lessard's Queen's University site¹⁰, or text-grammar based, as in Allô Prof. There is no easy way of identifying sites which reflect one's preferred method, however. Reviews found in resource and gateway sites are not able to offer more than sound-bites like "an excellent site" or "a wealth of information", and these opinions are often injudicious.

Quality of the L2 Corpus

Exemplification policies on the Web often follow the tradition of school grammars. Examples are almost always 'made-up', and not authentic quotes from corpora. On sites which do not originate in a French-speaking country, examples are also frequently inaccurate. Gap-fills may be ill-conceived, as in this example from Ithaca¹¹. You are asked to fill the gap in the square brackets with a verb chosen from a multiple option:

"(Did you walk) [_____] seule pour
venir chez moi?"

The only relevant selection the learner can make from the options offered is "se promener", which does indeed translate 'to walk', but not in this sentence's context of 'going to a place on foot'.

Throughout most of the material which I have seen, the written form of the language predominates, again, as in traditional grammars. A fairly conservative interpretation of 'correct' usage is the norm, and there is little preoccupation with register.

Personal or 'Hobby' Sites

Individuals' home pages are as numerous in our area of investigation as they are elsewhere on the Web. Some have become household names. They can be dire, but they can be great fun and they can be educational. Bernard Pivot, a well-known French arts journalist has organised a dictation competition every year since 1985. La Dictée de Pivot on television is a French cultural landmark. His site¹² provides archives of all the 'Dictée de Pivot' events ever held, as well as information about similar competitions across the French-speaking world, and a complete handbook of French spelling, including discursive explanations and exercises. Other individuals reveal their own eccentric approaches to grammar, such as the owner of 'Le truc des genres'¹³ who claims to teach a way of predicting the genre of "more than 18000 French words" which involves learning forty endings by rote. I make no claim about the effectiveness of learning from

such individual inputs, but at its best, the genre 'personal Web site' can offer ideas that more concerted efforts miss out on. As far as use of the medium is concerned, individual 'hobby sites' are dependent on resources and are typically very uneven: the Pivot site uses hot links and gap-fills, whereas 'Truc des genres' is just a page of print put up on the Web.

Advantages of the Medium for Teaching Grammar

It has been claimed that there are analogies between the structure of hypertext and that of human languages (e.g. see McBride & Seago, this volume). Hypertext can also be a help to writers of grammar material in their struggles to find ways of making metalanguage accessible to learners; a Web writer could use links to provide not only examples but also definitions of any 'difficult' metalanguage used. Access to information is very easy, as users may click on icons, on links in main texts, or on indexed entries in frames; this seems perfect for allowing learners to find a 'bit' of grammar for quick remedial work, even if they are not sure what to call the item sought. Interactivity offers grammar-learners several advantages; automatic correction, tracking and self-scoring are facilities which Web tools are uniquely placed to provide. Interactivity with a teacher or a native speaker of L2, for example in a MOO or in a newsgroup, presents learners with attractive opportunities for individualized (and free) help with L2 grammar. Finally, the medium's ability to carry audio makes it possible to contemplate learning the spoken grammar of a language, whilst its potential in terms of graphics and animation could give rise to imaginative presentational devices to aid comprehension and memorisation of language structures.

What Actually Happens on the Web in Terms of French Grammar Teaching?

The use of words like 'could', 'possible' and 'potential' in the preceding paragraph will

have alerted readers to the fact that these facilities and opportunities turn out on closer inspection to be seriously underused, as a few hours of surfing soon show.

Use of Hypertext

In many sites, hot links are used for indexing purposes only. Site structure too often overemphasises embedding, which results in sparse screens and generates a feeling of 'going round-the-houses' for not much reward (Windows and frames for multiple choice questions and gap-fills are the main culprits in this respect).

Hot links can turn a site into a tool for quick look-up: this facility is well understood, as you can see with the many 'verb finder' sites, specialising in verb conjugations, such as ARTLF¹⁴. But the slowness of the Web often defeats the purpose. A verb-finder CD loaded on your desktop would be much faster. It might be even faster to look up the trusty old Bescherelle dictionary of verbs on your shelf (Bescherelle, 1990).

One of the things that hypertext technology could do well is correct learners' errors. However, the culture of error-correction found in most sites is minimalist. It involves supplying the right answer (with or without a score), but detailed feedback is never volunteered, though it would be easy to invite learners to click on links for further information or more exercises relating to the grammar point which causes them difficulties. At CIEP, the user is treated like a naughty girl (or boy). "*Testez vos connaissances*" (test your knowledge) reveals a sparse set of non-contextualised gap-fills, with a distinctly user-hostile response screen: on my system it produced a 'Javascript alert' window, with a triangular danger sign, and it responded to my – perfectly correct – answers with a damning "*Mauvaise réponse. Vous avez 0 points!*" (Bad answer! You have scored 0!), and when I tried again, with an abrasive "*Vous avez déjà répondu à cette question!*" (You've answered this question already!)

External links (i.e. to another site) are a frequent feature and they work well as pointers to resources, rather than as teaching tools. This is

understandable, as such a device if used would need maintenance, as shown by one of Jacques Léon's pages, which promises a self-testing link but in fact sends you off to an obsolete site in Marseilles.

Sometimes, a good idea emerges. Using an automatic mail facility, Ithaca motivates its learners into doing some composition as a consolidation activity: after they have completed a manipulation exercise, they are invited to embody the newly-learnt structure in a personal message, which they send to the site. It is then posted for all to see, with a caption showing who sent it and where they are from. This is not only a good example of a nice match between pedagogy and technology, but it also confirms the curate's egg nature of Web sites; I criticized Ithaca earlier for inaccuracy.

Non-textual Facilities

The medium's ability to carry audio is underused. Few sites bother at all. Many promise audio as a future development. Some have started building it in, but clicking merely succeeds in calling up an 'Under construction' screen. ILD has dialogues with a link to an audio recording, but the educational value of this needs to be questioned in terms of the use made of the sound (mere repetition of the print) and the quality of the dialogues themselves (inauthentic, non-contextualized). ILD's vocabulary lists are also linked to audio, which perhaps makes more sense. As to graphics and animation, neither were found in this study to have been used for pedagogical purposes, apart from the use of colours for, e.g. masculine nouns versus feminine.

Maintenance and Updating

Leaving a trace of maintenance activity on the site can be a bad idea. For instance, the University of Toronto's message saying "last updated 9th Oct 1996" does not encourage confidence in the site-owners' commitment to the site. On the other hand, the CIEP's 'Chronique' (like a newspaper language column, bringing news of neologisms, examples

of 'street' creativity, and a personal view of current linguistic change) is a delightful feature. It was last updated last week, as I write, indicating that the site-owners are constantly on the look-out for items to feed to their readers, and perhaps more relevant to reader loyalty and motivation, that someone is always there, looking after the site.

France à la Carte: A toolkit for innovative teaching

Sadly so far this study has only evidenced limited instances of good practice, often lost in a mass of mediocre material. So here is an example which provides relief from this gloomy picture! Designed for French language assistants and teachers of French as a foreign language, *France à la Carte* hosts a very small but hypertext-friendly model of what teachers and pupils can do with even a minuscule bit of realia. It is aimed at GCSE level, and is based on a children's story, beautifully illustrated in colour, which acts as the central resource for multi-layered language explorations, making very attractive use of frames, colours and graphics.

There is a showcase feel about this site, but it has thought of almost everything, and with some expanding (I shall suggest how below), it could be a wonderful grammatical playground for learners of any age. Last but not least, it treats teachers as adults, by giving them elements of pedagogy, which they can author themselves to create the tool that best suits them.

It has limitations. It is not a self-standing site. Its main aim is staff development for a specific audience. It deals with grammar via exercises only, offering no exposition of grammatical principles. But it shows the huge potential of a text-grammar based approach in a hypertext environment.

Newsgroups and MOOs

I have so far looked at Web-based material, but amongst general Internet tools which can

be accessed via the Web (though not themselves Web-based) are newsgroups (asynchronous bulletin board systems) and MOOs (synchronous chat systems). French newsgroups are more interested in scientific and IT issues than in language, therefore evaluating their contribution to grammar learning is not an onerous job! Comparing them with English-language newsgroups, however, it is clear that an opportunity is being missed in the French-speaking Web. Eastment lists no fewer than fifteen ELT-related newsgroups, including "A group for harsh criticism of poor spelling and grammar"! (*ibid*: 75).

As far as MOOs are concerned, again, the English-speaking world is dominant. Le MOO français¹⁵ potentially offers the opportunity to use the L2 in order to create objects, to talk about space, to effect transactions, etc., all of which user-moves could be designed so as to require that the learner sharpen up his or her level of accuracy, as the system will react with error messages if interventions are not couched in the terms that it expects. In reality, however, Le MOO français remains mostly 'under construction', and is very much under-visited.

Promotional Sites

French publishers' sites, such as Larousse¹⁶, CLE International¹⁷ or Didier¹⁸, are a good source of information on where to buy grammar materials, but they don't display samples of their wares. They offer nothing like the Cobuild site's free demonstration of concordancing, for instance¹⁹. Hachette has an excellent on-line generalist magazine reviewing Web-sites, 'L'Internet en français'²⁰. Both on-line and hard versions (available at news stands and station kiosks everywhere in France) are very attractive and offer (realistic!) mini-reviews of a wide variety of sites, but not so far of any French language site. When challenged on this in a personal communication, the editor, Frédéric Reillier, said that he was aware this was a 'weakness', but that his readers were more interested in learning English.

Conclusion

In 1996, Eastment felt that ELT materials on the World Wide Web represented a triumph of form over content. The present investigation into French grammar teaching on the Web has come up with a similar conclusion as regards content, which varies enormously in type and quality, and is not even so sure that form is triumphant. The francophone and French-teaching Web worlds lag far behind their EFL and ELT counterparts, and mainly fail to come up with tools that match up to the medium's rich potential. If we seek innovation in grammar teaching, we might want to look to sites like *France à la Carte*, ideally scaled up to comprise a variety of texts, including some from an oral corpus, self-keyed exercises with links to extra feedback or further practice, an Audio facility and perhaps a 'language chronicle' with regular updates to retain the feel of a human presence. This of course would have to prove economically feasible for an individual or an educational institution to prepare, but it is not technically impossible or even difficult today, let alone in the future. The Web for teaching French grammar is an underused tool and a chaotic resource, but it needn't be a waste of time, given some imagination.

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